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## **Expeditionary Forces: Superior Technology Defeated—The Battle of Maiwand**

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**D**uring the last half of the 19th century, Great Britain was the unquestioned global power. Although the Russian Empire was steadily expanding across Asia, the British Empire already spanned Africa, Asia, Australia, the Middle East, the Americas and the Pacific Ocean. British armies were deployed in various colonies, and the Royal Navy held it all together. British armies in the colonies were a combination of regular British (English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish) regiments and locally raised regiments whose officers were both local and British. British and local political officers ran highly effective intelligence networks throughout the colonies. British colonial armies frequently dispatched expeditions to fight in neighboring countries or establish a presence for political goals.

The British army was the past master at mounting expeditions and relied on its reputation for military excellence, technological superiority, unit cohesion, excellent intelligence and contracted logistic support from the local infrastructure. British expeditions were usually combined units from British colonial armies and allied local armies and were based on political alliances. Occasionally expeditions went fatally wrong. The Battle of Maiwand destroyed a British expeditionary brigade in Afghanistan. Even after 120 years, events of this forgotten battle provide relevant lessons to contemporary expeditionary forces.<sup>1</sup>



**The .45-caliber Martini-Henry rifle had a maximum effective range of 400 yards and could fire 15 to 20 rounds per minute.**

The British invasion resulted from British apprehension concerning Russian expansion into Central Asia in the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>2</sup> Independent Afghanistan was caught between advancing Russia and the British crown colony of India and tried to balance the demands of these empires. In summer 1878, a Russian delegation called on the Emir of Afghanistan in the capital city, Kabul. Afghan border guards, probably by mistake, turned away a countering British mission. The British quickly declared war, invaded Afghanistan and occupied the key cities of Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Khost. The emir put his son on the throne and fled north—vainly seeking Russian aid. He died soon after in Mazir-e-Sharif, Afghanistan. After his son, Yakub Khan, failed as interregnum emir, his British-backed neph-ew, Abdur Rahaman Khan, eventually succeeded him. Britain controlled Afghanistan's foreign policy with British troops stationed in Kabul and Kandahar. Britain effectively truncated Afghanistan into three independent provinces—Kabul, Kandahar and Herat. Sher Ali Khan, another British protégé, became governor of Kandahar while Abdur Rahaman Khan governed Kabul. A British Bombay army force, commanded by Lieutenant General J.M. Primrose, was stationed in Kandahar along with an Afghan army commanded by its governor. Herat province was governed by Ayub Khan, son of the late emir, who was out of British reach and influence. The British prepared to leave.



In spring 1880, it became apparent that Ayub Khan was preparing a large force of infantry, cavalry and artillery—probably with the goal of seizing Kandahar.<sup>3</sup> On 9 June Ayub Khan's advanced guard left Herat heading toward Kandahar. The main body followed six days later. On 21 June the British learned of the movement. On 30 June the British ordered a brigade to advance from Kandahar to the banks of the Helmand River to prevent Ayub Khan's force from crossing. On 2 July a composite brigade commanded by Brigadier General G.R.S. Burrows began to move, and by 11 July it had concentrated on the Helmand River.

Ayub Khan was trying to avoid decisive engagement with Burrows' brigade and move directly on Kandahar. He established a cavalry screen on his right flank to check the British brigade's movement from the south (Khushk-i-Nakhud). Burrows was tasked to prevent Ayub's passage to Kandahar or possibly to Ghazni by attacking him on the approaches to Kandahar. This left the British uncertain about the time and place of the battle. They had to monitor the enemy's

movement closely to chose the right time, place and tactical formation to intercept the marching Afghan columns.

The British brigade consisted of two cavalry reg-iments, the 3d Bombay Light Cavalry (316) and 3d Sind Horse (260); two regiments of Bombay native infantry, the 1st Bombay (Grenadiers) (648) and the 30th Bombay (Jacob's Rifles) (625); the British 66th Infantry, minus two companies (516); half of the 2d Company Bombay Sappers and Miners; and E Battery, B Brigade, Royal Horse Artillery (191). This was 2,599 combat soldiers, six 9-pounder cannons, and about 3,000 service and transport personnel.

The brigade trains was enormous. Besides normal supplies, additional ordnance and ammunition were carried, and the commissariat was augmented for a 30-day stay. Officers' kit and equipment were not limited. More than 3,000 transport animals—ammunition ponies, mules, donkeys, bullocks and hundreds of camels—were required to move the baggage. The animals required drovers, usually locally contracted Kandaharis. There were many other noncombatants, including cooks, water carriers, tailors, servants and stretcher-bearers.<sup>4</sup>

The British force was to join a larger Afghan army led by Sher Ali Khan, the Kandahar governor. The Afghan army had more than 6,000 soldiers, armed with British Snider rifles, four 6-pounder British smoothbore cannon and two 12-pounder British smoothbore howitzers.<sup>5</sup> British intelligence calculated the opposing force of Ayub Khan at 10 infantry regiments, 2,500 cavalry and six batteries of guns—6,000 to 8,000 men in all.<sup>6</sup>

## **On To Battle**

The British brigade had orders not to cross the Helmand River, but Sher Ali's Afghan army from Kandahar was already across. It was the hottest time of the year, and the river proved no obstacle, being practically dry and passable at numerous sites. The Afghan army from Kandahar pushed across the Helmand and took up positions on the far bank. As the combined force waited for the Afghan army from Herat, the governor's Afghan army troops from Kandahar became increasingly restless. It became clear that their loyalty was suspect, and Burrows and Sher Ali agreed to bring them back across the river and disarm them. Before this could be done, the Afghan infantry and artillery mutinied and moved to join the army from Herat. Much of the cavalry remained loyal. The British brigade launched a pursuit across the Helmand against the mutineers and recaptured the guns but not the artillery horses. Burrows formed an ad hoc battery with the captured smoothbores, but lacking artillery horses, he evacuated only 50 rounds per gun. The rest of the artillery ammunition was thrown into deep water holes in the Helmand River.<sup>7</sup>

Burrows was 80 miles from Kandahar with 25 miles of waterless desert immediately to his rear. The Helmand riverline was now indefensible, and Ayub Khan could cross almost anywhere. The combined Kandahar force had been approximately equal to the Herat force. The Herat force was growing from the addition of mutineers and local adherents. Consequently, Burrows withdrew some 35 miles to Khushk-i-Nakhud—where two of the five routes to Kandahar met and from where the other three could be reached readily. Burrows closed on Khushk-i-Nakhud on 17 July, the same day Ayub Khan's cavalry reached Burrows' previous position on the Helmand. Burrows was a three-day march from Kandahar. If he withdrew to the Kandahar fortifications, Ayub

Khan's force might bypass Kandahar to take Ghazni and cut communications between Kabul and Kandahar. Burrows decided to hold his position and defeat Ayub Khan's advance guard before the main body could close.



**A panorama of the Maiwand battlefield.**

With the arrival of Ayub Khan's advance guard, under Loynab Khushdil Khan, on the Helmand's east bank, both sides intensified their reconnaissance. The British intelligence network, run by Lieutenant Colonel Oliver St. John, faced obstacles from the growing anti-British popular uprising in the region. Brigade daily reconnaissance patrols to Sang Bur, Garmab (about 22 kilometers northwest and north of Khushk-i-Nakhud) and the Arghandab River in the south could safely monitor the

approaches to Kandahar for only a brief time during the day. Although British scouts detected the presence of small elements of the Afghan army at Sang Bur, Garmab and Maiwand three or four days before the battle, Burrows and St. John failed to determine their enemy's whereabouts. In fact the advance guard of the Afghan army arrived in Garmab on 25 July, while a number of its forward elements and a group of *ghazis* reached Maiwand the same day. The following day Ayub Khan arrived in Sang Bur just after the British patrol left the place. Ayub intended to march the following day (July 27) to Maiwand, which by then would be secured by his advance party.

On 26 July British spies reported that Ayub Khan's advanced forces were in Maiwand and that the size of Ayub Khan's force was 3,500 regular infantry; 2,000 cavalry; 34 cannons; 1,500 mutineers; and 3,500 irregular volunteers. It was evident that Ayub Khan was using the northern approach. The spies further reported that the main body should close on Maiwand on 27 July.<sup>8</sup> Afghan intelligence pinpointed Burrows' force.

Burrows discounted the intelligence estimates on the force's size and the main body's closure time. Early on 27 July the British brigade began to move north toward Maiwand. The British 66th Regiment soldiers breakfasted early as usual, but the word did not get out in time. The native units, which normally breakfasted later at midday, were not fed, and many marched with empty canteens. The British brigade covered six-plus miles toward Maiwand. Spies met the column and confirmed that the Herat army's main body was six miles (two hours) from Maiwand. The Afghan army was moving at twice the rate as the baggage-encumbered British. It was too late to retreat and the Afghans had to be prevented from bypassing Kandahar, so the British decided to attack.

## **Correlation of Forces**

There has been no balanced study of the correlation of forces in the Maiwand battle. Most British studies apply different criteria in calculating the overall strength of the opposing combat and

supporting forces. British studies often suggest that a British brigade of about 2,500 faced an army of 15,000 to 25,000 Afghan regulars and irregulars. This assessment is misleading because it counts thousands of unarmed Afghan service and support elements, civilian camp followers and curious villagers as part of the Afghan combatants while discounting more than 3,000 British camp followers, service details and transport crews. Further, the correlation is based on pure numbers without factoring in qualitative aspects. A balanced correlation of forces considers both quantity and quality (weapons effectiveness, training, organization, morale, command and logistics).

The British force totaled 2,599 combat soldiers and about 3,000 service and transport details. The Afghan force comprised the 1st Infantry Brigade (3 Kabuli regiments, each 500 strong) 2d Infantry Brigade, (one Kandahari and two Kabuli regiments of 500 men each); 3d Infantry Brigade (three Herati regiments each 366 strong) the cavalry brigade (three Kabuli regiments of 300 each) and one mountain and four field artillery batteries (each battery had 100 gunners and 6 guns)—a total of 5,500 regular soldiers. Herati irregular horsemen numbered 1,500.<sup>9</sup> Some 500 tribal horsemen defected from sirdar Sher Ali's army. About 1,000 irregular infantry also joined the army in farah, totaling about 8,500.

Many tribal warriors and local inhabitants also joined Ayub Khan's forces as they moved from Herat to Maiwand. These *ghazis* were poorly armed with locally made or old European muskets. Many carried only swords and spears or were unarmed and followed the army to share the glory and spoils of a holy war (*Jihad*). Some British authors estimate the number of these *ghazis* as high as 15,000, which official accounts discount as an exaggeration.<sup>10</sup>

In small arms, the British infantry regiments had significant superiority over Afghan foot soldiers since the British soldiers were armed with Martini-Henry and Snider breech-loading rifles. The 66th was armed with the Martini-Henry rifle; the British native infantry had the older Snider rifles; the cavalry had the Snider carbine. The Martini-Henry rifle was a real technological edge for the British force. With a maximum effective range of 400 yards, this .45-caliber weapon could fire 15 to 20 rounds per minute. The Snider was a pattern 1853 rifled musket that had been converted to breech-loading and could fire 10 to 15 .557-caliber rounds per minute out to an effective range of 400 yards. The British infantry units were trained to conduct area fire out to 1,200 yards.

The opposing five Kabuli infantry regiments were armed with 1853 Enfield muzzle-loading rifles that fired two to three shots per minute. The Herati and Kandahari regiments carried locally produced copies of Enfield and Snider rifles with a 300-yard maximum effective range.<sup>11</sup> The irregular troops were armed with an assortment of ancient Tower, Brown Bess and Brunswick flintlock muskets (possibly seized during the First Anglo-Afghan War) or primitive Afghan muskets with a 50- to 80-yard maximum effective range and a rate of fire of one shot per two minutes.<sup>12</sup> In terms of small-arms firepower, the correlation of forces was at least 8-to-1 in favor of the British infantry.

However, the Afghan army had better artillery; particularly its six very effective 12-pound, breech-loading, 3-inch rifled Armstrong guns. Their rate of fire was at least five rounds per minute. The Afghan artillery also included 16 6-pounder field guns, two 12-pounder howitzers,

two 4.5-inch howitzers and four 3-pounder field guns—all smoothbore weapons. The British artillery had six 9-pounder muzzle-loading rifled guns and six smoothbore pieces—four 6-pounder field guns and two 12-pounder howitzers. The horse artillery's 9-pounder field guns could fire shrapnel, case shot and high explosive out to 3,500 yards.<sup>13</sup> The Afghan artillery's effectiveness significantly increased through its continuous maneuver, eventually bringing some guns to 500 yards from the British line. Artillery played a dominant role in the battle.

The British troops had better training and discipline and were supported by an organized logistic system. The Afghan army was an odd assortment of fighters with differing levels of training, armament and organization. They were united only by common purpose. However, there was no guarantee that the army would stay together for long since, in the absence of a viable logistic support system, most of the combatants were fending for themselves. Even the regular units depended on local supplies. Not surprisingly, after the battle thousands of *ghazis* left to carry their wounded and dead to their homes or just celebrated the victory and left.



**Soldiers of the Royal Horse Artillery coming out of; action before their battery position is overwhelmed.**

The British brigade's overall combat effectiveness was much higher than the Afghan army's. What determined the outcome of the battle, however, was not firepower but the Afghan forces' bold maneuver backed by Ayub Khan's effective command and control. Afghan maneuver changed the correlation of forces at the decisive moment when highly motivated *ghazis*' swords and spears were more effective in command and control than modern rifles.

## **Movement to Contact and Artillery Duel**

At 0700 a 3d Bombay Light Cavalry squadron and two guns led the British column out of camp. The brigade staff and the rest of the 3d Bombay Light Cavalry and two more guns were 500 yards behind the advance party. Infantry regiments followed in parallel columns with the smoothbore battery and sappers between the columns. The 3d Sind Horse and two more guns comprised the rear guard, while a mixed force of cavalry and infantry escorted the slow-moving baggage.<sup>14</sup>

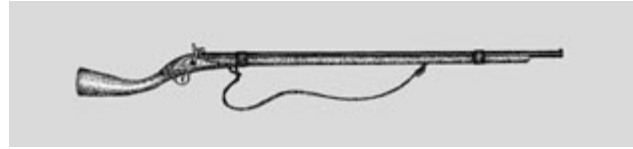


The main body of Ayub Khan's force left Sang Bur that morning, moving in several columns toward Maiwand. The cavalry regiments and irregular horsemen covered the right flank, and infantry regiments moved in regimental columns on the left. The Afghan horse artillery's 24 guns moved with the infantry as did the six mountain guns mounted on mules. Large groups of *ghazis* moved from different directions

toward Maiwand.

It was a hot day, with the temperature reaching 120 degrees Fahrenheit by late morning and the prevailing haze limiting visibility to under a mile. As the British column reached halfway between Moshak and Karezak (10 kilometers south of Maiwand), Burrows learned that Ayub Khan was moving in force on Maiwand. As the column moved near Mahmudabad village, further intelligence indicated Afghan columns were moving across the British Front from west to east six to seven miles away.<sup>15</sup> Burrows decided to engage the Afghan force while it was on the march. He left the baggage at Mahmudabad, and the column turned northwest onto a barren plain cut by several ravines. On the far side of the village is a large ravine, 15 to 25 feet deep and 50 to 100 feet wide, which runs northeasterly. Farther to the north, near Khik village, a narrower ravine runs northwest which later provided cover for the Afghan infantry.<sup>16</sup>

As the British column veered to the left, Lieutenant H. MacLaine quickly led his two Royal Horse Artillery guns from the advance party across the ravine to the plain. He took up a firing position about a mile beyond the ravine and opened fire at a range of 1,700 yards. It was 1045 and MacLaine was firing into the middle or rear of the Afghan column. Another horse artillery gun section arrived and took up positions about 200 yards from the ravine. As the British column deployed, it formed two lines behind the guns with the Grenadiers on the left of the artillery battery, four companies of the Jacob's Rifles to the right and the 66th Foot on the extreme right. Four companies of the Jacob's Rifles were in reserve. The ad hoc smoothbore battery set up to the left rear of the Royal Horse Artillery. The cavalry regiments were deployed on the left rear in column formation. A mixed detachment of infantry and cavalry protected the baggage.



**The Afghan musket, or *Jezail*, had an 80-yard maximum effective range and a rate of fire of one shot per two minutes.**

Although the British brigade forestalled the Afghan force in opening fire and deploying infantry columns into combat formation—two keys to success in a meeting battle—it failed to exploit tactical initiative. The opening artillery fire was handicapped by an insufficient number of guns and poor visibility while their tactical advantage in early deployment was lost as they went on the defense on open terrain, thus surrendering the maneuver initiative to the Afghans. Options open to Burrows included a bold attack at the flank of the Afghan columns before they could deploy or a defense along the ravine at the edge of Mahmudabad and Khik villages. The formation taken up by the brigade did not support either offensive or defensive action.

The Afghan army detected the British brigade's movement as it neared Mahmudabad. As the British column turned left to deploy for battle, the Afghan command matched the move and veered right. The Afghan artillery rushed to the fight as the front of the column began to turn around and retrace its steps from Maiwand. As the Afghan regiments deployed, they saw the British forces lined up on the defense with their flanks open and vulnerable. Ayub Khan decided to attack the open enemy flanks by deploying cavalry to the far flank (his right flank) and moving irregular infantry and *ghazis* to the left flank where a ravine offered protection. He deployed regular infantry regiments in the center and ordered his 30 guns to take up positions on a line from the center to the left flank. Given the varying speed of infantry, cavalry and artillery, Ayub's force deployed into combat formation in a coordinated manner. The terrain allowed the irregular infantry and *ghazis* to threaten the British right flank while the British left flank, with its wider space for man-euver, was ideal ground for cavalry action. The Afghan deployment of regular infantry in the center was designed to maintain the stability of the Afghan line.

About 30 minutes after British guns fired the first shot, leading Afghan artillery pieces moved into range and began pounding the deploying British line. As more Afghan guns arrived, they moved into one of five firing locations that delivered punishing fire on the British formation. The 66th and Jacob's Rifles were partially protected since they were lying down behind a small fold in the ground. They suffered lightly during the artillery duel, but the Royal Horse Artillery battery, the Grenadiers and two Jacob's Rifles companies at the extreme left had little cover and suffered heavily. Ayub Khan not only had more guns than the British; his six breech-loading Armstrong guns also fired heavier shells. The Afghan artillery was firing so effectively that it was falsely rumored to be manned by Russian gunners.<sup>17</sup> It took almost another half hour before the Afghan irregular infantry and cavalry deployed in combat formation about 800 yards from the British position. It was now a little past noon.

## **Infantry and Cavalry Action**

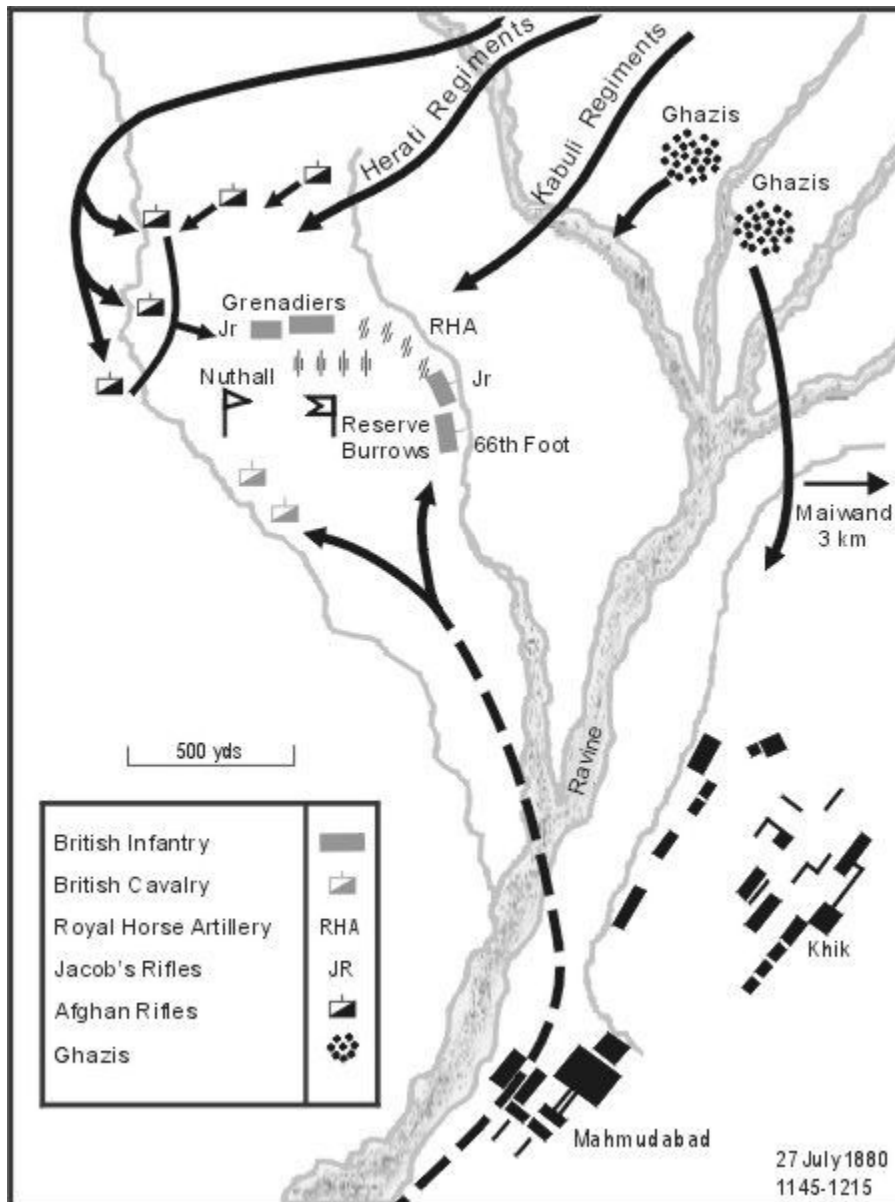
The *ghazis* initiated the first Afghan infantry attack on the British line against the 66th Foot. Highly motivated by religious and patriotic fervor, large numbers of devout *ghazis* in white



garments led the assault.<sup>18</sup> The 66th, with its superior firepower, successfully repelled the successive waves of the attack while inflicting heavy losses on the *ghazis*, whose rudimentary muskets, swords and spears were no match for the Martini-Henrys. The British line was firing in company volleys starting at 1,200 yards—a range at which the Afghan combatants could not return effective fire.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Burrows ordered two 12-pounder howitzers from the smoothbore battery to reinforce the 66th. The artillery barrage and the Martini-Henrys' withering fire pinned down the *ghazis*, who took shelter in the ravine facing the British right flank.

On the British left flank, regular Kabuli cavalry regiments and irregular Herat horsemen in loose formations threatened the British open flank. Burrows ordered the grenadiers to wheel their two left companies slightly back and committed his entire infantry reserve to extend the fighting line. Further, he shifted the two 12-pounder howitzers from the right flank back to the center. Intensified British fire forced the Afghan cavalry to fall back and maintain an 800-yard distance from the British troops to be out of Snider rifle and carbine area fire range.

Meanwhile, Afghan artillery pieces moved forward to firing positions closer to the enemy as Afghan regular infantry regiments, in columns and squares, approached the British center. Irregular troops and *ghazis* accompanied the Afghan regiments. The Afghan artillery displacement slowed their bombardment, and Burrows decided to attack the Afghan infantry to break up its deployment for combat. At about half past noon, Burrows ordered the Grenadiers and the two Jacob's Rifles companies at its left to advance 500 yards and break up the impending attack with volleys of rifle fire. The regiment had barely moved 200 yards when heavy artillery fire forced it to halt, lie down and take up the defense.

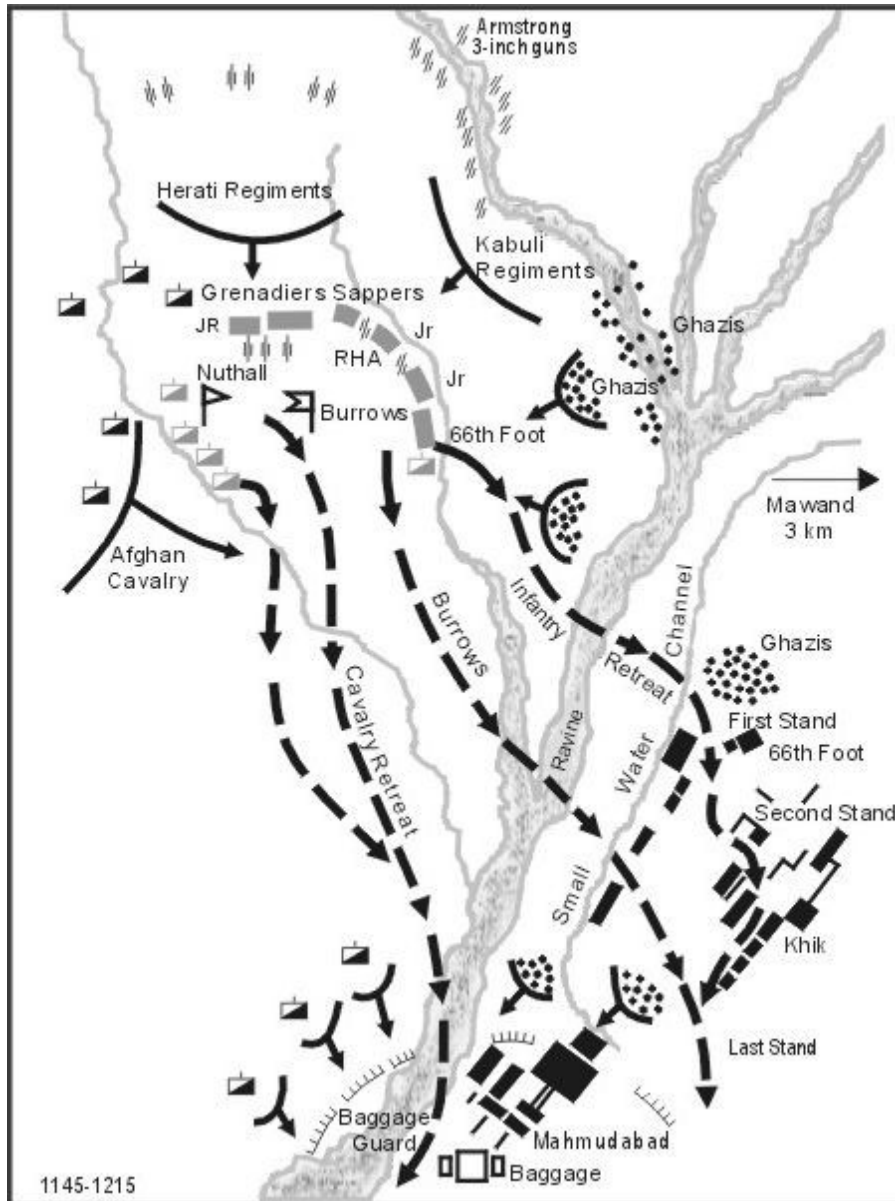


At this time, the Afghan infantry had reached a line one-half mile from the British positions, with the Herati regiments facing the Grenadiers and the Kabuli regiments advancing against the Jacob's Rifles. The British commander ordered his troops to repel the impending Afghan attack by rifle fire. As the Heratis reached a line 800 yards from the British positions, the Grenadiers opened up with a regimental volley, causing heavy losses in the Afghan ranks. Despite successive attempts, the outgunned Herati regiments failed to resume the advance and were forced to retreat out of the Sniders' effective range. Kabuli regiments attacking the Jacob's Rifles met similar Snider rifle fire

and were forced to halt.

During the next hour and a half, the Afghan command undertook a major force regrouping to resume the attack. Afghan sources describe this as the most critical phase of the battle. Troops had suffered heavy casualties, and many wounded needed immediate attention. The whole army was tired and thirsty after a long march. Many tribal irregulars wanted to evacuate their wounded and dead comrades from the battlefield.<sup>20</sup> Afghans still speak of a legendary heroine named Malala who, with a number of other Afghan women, helped *ghazis* on the battlefield. Reciting traditional patriotic ballads, Malala instilled a new spirit of valor and perseverance into the tired tribal warriors.<sup>21</sup>

Afghan forces commander in chief Lieutenant General Hafizullah Khan halted the offensive temporarily. He regrouped his forces, which included moving artillery closer to the front line, building up infantry against the British center for the main attack and threatening the British flanks to shift the enemy's attention.<sup>22</sup> While the main Afghan forces were regrouping, swarms of *ghazis* and irregular cavalry threatened the British baggage train at Mahmudabad village. This threat tied up a significant number of British foot and mounted soldiers throughout the battle.



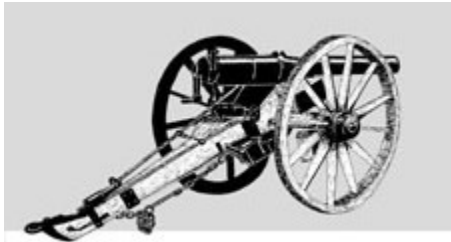
## Culmination and British Rout

Around 1300 a large Afghan buildup confronted the Grenadiers. *Ghazis* moved to the British rear through the ravines. At 1330 the British smoothbore battery withdrew since it was out of ammunition. This affected the morale of the native infantry on the left flank. While the British line suffered from continuous Afghan artillery fire, the British repulsed Afghan cavalry on the left flank. However, the Afghan army was regrouping for the offensive. Artillery pieces were brought as close as 500 to 600 yards from British positions, some guns even closer.

Between 1400 and 1430 the fire from the Afghan guns diminished. The British hoped the Afghans were out of ammunition, but it was a prelude to an all-out attack. At about 1430 dense masses of irregulars supported by regular infantry rose out of the flanking ravine and fell on the British center and left. The Heratis hit the grenadiers and the Kabulis engaged the Jacob's Rifles. Masses of *ghazis*, some dressed in suicidal "white shrouds," spearheaded the attack. The British infantry fire that

had kept the Afghans at bay failed to check the *ghazis*' massed rush.<sup>23</sup> The two Jacob's Rifles companies on the left came under enormous pressure. Having lost all their officers, the companies broke and fled to the Grenadiers who were facing Afghans at close quarters. At that distance the Sniders and carbines were not as effective as the Afghans' close-combat weapons.

As the left wing was about to dissolve, the Royal Horse Artillery battery began to withdraw. The Afghans captured two guns. The artillery's withdrawal led to the retreat of the Grenadiers and the Jacob's Rifles, which fell back on the left-hand companies of the 66th.



**Afghan artillery included six breech-loading, 3-inch rifled Armstrongs with a rate of fire of five rounds per minute.**

As the British line was fast dissolving, Burrows ordered a cavalry charge. But the poorly led action failed to stabilize the line, and the cavalry retreated toward Mahmudabad village. Since the cavalry was split into small pockets from the outset, it was unable to concentrate effectively at the decisive moment.

As the retreating native infantry fell back onto the ranks of the 66th, the British formation collapsed. Under intensifying pressure, elements of Jacob's Rifles and part of the Grenadiers retired to Mah-mudabad, while the rest of the Grenadiers and the 66th were forced off to the right toward Khik. Desperate attempts to regroup for an organized stand failed amid the chaos. Elements of the 66th made an unsuccessful stand in the Khik orchards. About 100 soldiers made a final stand in a garden on the southern edge of the village and all perished.



**As the retreating native infantry fell back onto the ranks of the 66th, the British formation collapsed. About 100 soldiers made an unsuccessful stand in a garden on the edge of Khik and all perished.**

Burrows followed the retreating troops through Khik and, seeing the hopeless situation, ordered them to retire. By 1500 the plain between Mahmudabad and Khushk-i-Nakhud was covered by a column of fugitives heading south toward Kandahar. The British suffered most of their losses during the retreat, although it would have been even worse if the Afghan army had not stopped for water and to loot the bodies and baggage train. The British lost 1,757 dead, 175 wounded, seven guns, 1,000 rifles, 2,425 transport animals, more than 200 horses, 278,200 rifle bullets and 448 artillery shells. The Afghan forces lost 1,250 regular soldiers and 800 to 1,500 irregular fighters.

The task organization of the British brigade was not compatible with stand-alone combat. Burrows' brigade initially was tasked and tailored to back up sirdar Sher Ali's forces that were deployed on the Helmand River to block Ayub's advance. However, once Sher Ali's army defected to Ayub's side, the British mission changed to fighting the entire Herat army without major reinforcement, a recipe for failure.



**The Afghan army used local copies of the British pattern 53 Enfield rifled musket.**

The Maiwand battle is characterized by the absence of well-defined tactical-operational coordination on both sides. Ayub compromised his operational objective by becoming decisively engaged with a smaller force before reaching Kandahar. He could have changed the course of the war by blocking Burrows'

brigade with a reinforced advance detachment while moving the main force directly to Kandahar where the British defenses were weakened. Even after he defeated the British forces at Maiwand, Ayub failed to turn his tactical success into operational achievement. He did not pursue the retreating British forces or strike unprepared British forces in Kandahar. It took Ayub eight days to move from Maiwand to Kandahar. By then, he faced a more organized defense.

Similarly, British forces failed to mass operationally, settling for tactical successes. Instead of facing Ayub in Kandahar and shifting forces from Kabul, which was at that time secure under its new ally Amir Abdurrahman, they split their forces between Helmand, Kandahar and Kalat. When the British finally massed operationally by moving General Roberts' division from Kabul to Kandahar on 2 September, they defeated Ayub. This could have been done without sacrificing Burrows' brigade in late July.

The battle was decided by maneuver—a key factor for winning a meeting battle. When the opposing sides met at Maiwand, neither side had an appreciable terrain advantage. However, the Afghan forces successfully exploited British lack of mobility to threaten Burrows' brigade's open flanks. Maneuver of the Afghan artillery strengthened the Afghan tactical formation which was much weaker in small arms but stronger in artillery. The Afghans succeeded in moving their guns to within a few hundred yards of the enemy line. The lack of reserves denied tactical flexibility to the British formation. Deploying the cavalry in small packets hindered a decisive cavalry charge when the Afghan infantry penetrated the British line.

British cavalry use of carbines instead of swords during the counterattack significantly weakened its shock action. The Afghan *ghazis*' effective use of close-combat weapons played a major role in breaking the British line. The longer-range Martini-Henrys, Snider rifles and carbines enabled the British infantry and dismounted cavalry to inflict heavy losses on the enemy. According to British sources, Burrows' brigade shot 382,881 rounds of rifle ammunition during three hours of intensive combat, approximately 2,000 rounds per minute—enormous firepower on a 19th-century battlefield. The fire halted the attack by overwhelming numbers of enemy troops. However, the lack of maneuver and failure to use terrain undermined the fire's effectiveness, and the British line dissolved.

Maiwand was one of the major military disasters of the Victorian era. On 22 January 1879, a British force at Isandhlwana lost 1,700 men during the Zulu wars. These two defeats reverberated through Britain with much the same impact as the 7th Cavalry's 1876 defeat at Little Big Horn where 244 US soldiers lost their lives. After Maiwand, Ayub's force laid siege to Kandahar and was eventually defeated by a British relief force from Kabul. However, the British realized there was no military solution for their political objectives in Afghanistan. Shortly after the victory, the British army withdrew from Afghanistan into British India. Afghanistan was reunited and independent again—under Amir Abdurrahman. One result of the British defeat at Maiwand was Great Britain's 1895 decision to abolish the separate presidency armies (such as the Bombay army) and focus recruitment among the so-called martial races of Northern India—the Sikhs, Punjabis and Gurkhas. However, the basic British colonial army system and expeditionary procedures remained intact and continued, with good results and bad, through World War II. Their past expeditionary experience is still worth study by the expeditionary planners and commanders of today.

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## Cautionary Lessons for Future Expeditions

**At a certain point, quantity has a quality all its own.** The Afghans massed 30 artillery pieces to 12 British, 8,500 infantry to 1,750 British infantry and about 2,000 cavalry to 575 cavalry. Quantity, coupled with the excellence of Afghan artillery and the proper use of terrain, assured the Afghan victory.

**Technology is a tool, not an excuse to violate military principles.** The Afghans negated the advantage of the rapid-firing Martini-Henry rifle by using the terrain to mask their approach for the critical attack. The British relied on the strength of their technology and chose their battle site on open ground surrounded by flanking ravines.

**A high-technology force may be countered by a lower-technology force if that lower-technology force has invested in select high technology.** The Afghans had the Armstrong breech-loading rifled cannon that outranged and outperformed the British artillery.

**Logistics is a problem for an expeditionary force.** The British chose to bring a month's worth of supplies rather than maintain a secure line of communication back to Kandahar. This encumbered the maneuver force with a large, slow-moving, unwieldy element that slowed the

pace of advance to a crawl and tied up a significant portion of the combat force in trains protection.

**Timely tactical and operational intelligence is a constant problem.** The British force expected to meet the Afghan advance guard but met the entire army. The British did not have a good order of battle for the Afghan forces. The British human intelligence effort was fairly efficient but did not provide intelligence quickly enough. The commander also discounted accurate intelligence reports.

**Water supply is a primary expeditionary concern.** The British force was crippled by the lack of water. Even if sufficient water was available in the trains, resupply from the trains to the forward elements remained a problem. Today, the lack of an armored supply vehicle remains a problem for contemporary forces.

**Alliances and coalition forces are only as strong as the weakest element.** The combined British-Afghan force would have been a match for the Afghan force from Herat. When the Afghan force mutinied, the British force should have withdrawn to Kandahar.

**The meeting battle is a highly probable form of combat for an expeditionary force.** The British seized the initiative and opened fire first but did not take the Afghan force from the flank. Rather, it went to the defense after choosing the wrong terrain to conduct the meeting battle.

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1. Much of the material in this article is extracted from a paper author Ali Jalali wrote in Pashto. He presented the paper at the 120th Anniversary of the Maiwand Conference, Bonn, Germany, on 18 November 2000.

2. Map 1 based on maps in Brian Robson, "Maiwand: A Forgotten Disaster," *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal*, Volume 94, Number 2, 1967, 236.

3. Brian Robson, "Maiwand, 27th July 1880," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, No. 208, 1973, 194-95.

4. Leigh Maxwell, *My God—Maiwand: Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force, 1878-1880* (London: Leo Cooper, 1979), 92-93.

5. Ibid., 74.

6. Brian Robson, *The Road to Kabul: The Second Afghan War, 1878-1881* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1986), 224.

7. Maxwell, 78-83.

8. Robson, *The Road to Kabul*, 228. There were actually 30 guns.

9. The Kabuli, Herati and Kandahari regiments were named after the cities in which they were originally raised—Kabul, Herat and Kandahar. Over time, their ranks were filled with recruits from all over Afghanistan, but the regiments retained these designations.
10. Maxwell, 98; *The Second Afghan War, 1878-1880, Official Account*, London, 1908, 696.
11. As described by Mirza Mohammad Akbar, pay clerk of Ayub Khan's Kandahari regiment, *The Second Afghan War, 1878-1880, Official Account*, 696.
12. Howard Hensmann, *The Afghan War of 1879-80* (London: W.H. Allen, 1881), 324.
13. Ibid., 197.
14. *The Second Afghan War, 1878-1880, Official Account*, 499-501.
15. Almost all British sources call the village "Mondabad," which is incorrect.
16. This village is recorded as "Khig" in British sources, which is incorrect.
17. William Trousdale, ed., *War in Afghanistan 1879-80, The Personal Diary of Major General Sir Charles MacGregor* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 217.
18. Their white garment symbolized the shroud, meaning they were ready to fight until death. Such devoted groups, known as "kafan poshan" or "shroud wearers," were often seen in the Anglo-Afghan battles.
19. Maxwell, 130.
20. Afghan eyewitness account recorded by Yaqub Ali Khafi, *Padshahan-e Motaakherine-e Afghanistan (The Recent Kings of Afghanistan)* (Kabul, 1955), Vol. 2, 551. Printed from manuscript. Also see the account of the pay clerk of Ayub Khan's Kandahari regiments recorded in annex 28, *The Second Afghan War, 1878-1880, Official Account*, 696.
21. One of the couplets says in Pashto: "If you fail to be martyred at Maiwand, by God, my love, you will live only a disgraceful life." Malala's grave is now a shrine in her native Khik.
22. Yaqub Ali Khafi, 550-52.
23. "General Burrows Report," *London Gazette*, November 1880.

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**Photos:**

Arms illustrations by John E. Richards

Other illustrations from "My God – Maiwand!"